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Great Places introduced

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People wanting to promote the "great places" across the state have had to navigate a labyrinth of state agencies and departments to make their idea a reality.

The new state Great Places initiative is designed to fit a place's vision, not to make the vision fit state programs, said Anita Walker, director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs.

"We at the state have done a great job of telling you to work together, but at the giant enterprise we call state government, we're not very good at working together," she told about 175 people gathered in the auditorium of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art last week to learn more about the program.

The public forum was the eighth of 10 forums held across the state to spread the word about Gov. Tom Vilsack's Great Places initiative.

Iowa Great Places, announced by Mr. Vilsack in his condition of the state address in January, is designed to streamline government programs, making it easier to connect those who have an idea with those state agencies and programs that can bring the idea to life.

The initiative will unite 18 state agencies with Iowans to stimulate ideas and planning, streamline access to available state resources, help leverage local and private resources and share technical expertise.

In addition to Ms. Walker's presentation, the forum also included an interactive "Dream Session," where people were encouraged to think about what they consider a great place in Iowa and what should happen to make that place better.

At the meeting, ideas were not in short supply.

Forum attendees rattled off a list of places they already considered great in Iowa, including CSPA Gallery, Dubuque, downtown Iowa City, Mount Vernon, the Iowa State Fair, Brucemore and the Amana Colonies, among other things.

Many also had ideas on how to make places better.

"We need a little bit more than lip service to diversity," said Linda Langston, a Linn County supervisor.

Josh Schamberger, president of the Iowa City/Coralville Convention and Visitors Bureau, said that the Corridor needs to do a better job at engaging the over 50,000 college students in the area.

Other suggestions from audience members ranged from creating a bike trail around the seven villages in Amana, dealing with vacant properties in Cedar Rapids and creating more variety in live music venues.

Communities, regions and districts that wish to become one of Iowa's Great Places have to submit an "invitation" by July 1 to the Great Places team.

Throughout July and August, Great Places "coaches" will then work with each place to get their offers ready for a final selection presentation in September. By Oct. 1, a citizen advisory council appointed by Mr. Vilsack will help select the three pilot Great Places.

Negotiation of partnership agreements with those places will take place through the fall, with final agreements by Dec. 31, 2005. Funding will be applied to program design, preparation of communities and investment through grants, loans, technical assistance and services to pilot Great Places.

For more information about the Great Places initiative, visit www.iowa-greatplaces.gov. **CBJ**



At a public forum designed to educate people about the Great Places initiative last week, Kimberly Baxter with the Iowa Department of Human Rights led an interactive "Dream Session."

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